

**Breaking Barriers: Advancing Disability Rights in the
Democratic People's Republic of Korea**

By

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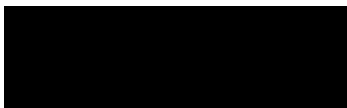
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Abstract

This dissertation aims to understand how the DPRK can improve its disability rights situation, analysing the issue in the context of the neurodiversity movement. This research takes the form of a case study, analysing various factors affecting the lived experience of disabled people. Factors found to be stifling the advancement of the disability rights movement include a poor standard of healthcare including a largely hidden psychiatric care system, a very limited legal disability rights framework that fails to address intersections with other marginalised groups, a lacklustre social security framework and a penal system that routinely denies individuals their basic human rights and creates an especially untenable environment for those with physical and neurodiverse conditions due to arduous labour and harsh treatment by authorities. Also explored is the ableist function of conscription, likely to be causing great harm to many people with neurodivergent conditions. State media is also found to be problematic, such as in that it demonstrates a lack of empowering coverage of disabled people. Another factor explored is the lack of advocacy organisations aside from the KFPD and the complication of self-advocacy due to restrictions on freedom of assembly and the internet. While not defending the regime, the author also expresses his viewpoint that although complications have arisen from them, the disability rights movement is in many ways compatible with the DPRK's Communist and Juche ideologies, such as in that Juche advocates for independent and creative action to rectify issues arising in state-building, which should surely include those with disabilities. Therefore, the author believes these ideologies could be used to make improving the disability rights issue more palatable for the DPRK government. Despite this, the DPRK shares many of the hallmarks of the poor treatment of disability rights in other authoritarian states, and meaningful progress is likely to take many years. Further research into the situation of DPRK citizens with psychiatric and neurodevelopmental conditions is of great importance, and the author hopes that the conditions for more research to take place will start to arise in the next decade.

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I. Introduction

There has been a significant amount of international concern relating to the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) throughout recent years (United Nations, 2023), and disability rights are no exception to this. Despite the Persons With Disability Protection Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (enacted 2003, amended 2013) stipulating that the State respects the character of disabled people and upholds their political and social rights and interests in the same way as people without disabilities (Gang, 2020), existing literature paints a picture of a government that thoroughly fails to fulfil this promise. A picture is painted of a state where poverty, combined with a pervasive cultural stigma, has a very serious impact on the quality of life of disabled people (Zellweger, 2014, p. 14).

The DPRK is signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), signing it in 2013 and ratifying it in 2016 (Won et al., 2017, p. 162). The country's constitution also states that its citizens are entitled to free healthcare, and that those who are unable to work due to illness or physical disability are entitled to "material support" (Gang, 2020). In 2018, the DPRK government published a report to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities in which it is stated that, as of 2016, those with disabilities made up 5.5% of the country's population. Disability was found to be slightly more prevalent in females, with 5.9% of women exhibiting a disability. In men, 5.1% were found to be disabled. The report also stated that physical disabilities accounted for 2.5 per cent of the population, mental illness accounted for 0.4 per cent, intellectual disability accounted for 0.3 per cent, language disability at 0.4 per cent and hearing disability accounted for 1.2 percent (Lee et al., 2020, pp. 468-469). A significant of literature written on the topic explores the many ways in which DPRK society and government heavily oppresses those with both physical and psychological conditions, and some of the ways this is done are quite egregious. For example, refugees have testified that the DPRK government attempts to suppress the social existence of disabled people by limiting the areas in which they are able to reside, reducing their presence in cities that receive foreign scrutiny such as Pyongyang, Kaesong, Chongjin and Nampo (Lord et al., 2016, p. 39).

Despite the generally bleak situation of the rights of disabled people in the DPRK, some progress has been made, such as in the 1998 foundation of a civil society organisation named the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled (KFPD) and the organisation's advocacy activities resulted in the adoption of the aforementioned 2003 Persons With Disability Protection Law, which accelerated the provision of equipment such as wheelchairs, prostheses and hearing aids (Zellweger, 2014, pp. 16-17).

Terms used to refer to disabled people in the DPRK include *changaaja* (combination of “obstacle” and “person”, 장애자) and *bulguja* (불구자, handicapped), or *yeong'ye kun'in* (영예군인, honoured veteran) to refer to those disabled as a result of military service (Zellweger, 2014, p. 12, 23). Although the rights of those with physical disabilities is a topic that has been the subject of a significant amount of research that is explored in this paper, comparatively not much is known about the state of rights for those with neurological and psychiatric conditions. This is partly due to the DPRK government's own reluctance to engage with the issue. For example, during the 2017 visit of Catalina Devandas Aguilar, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, access to psychiatric hospitals or opportunities to meet people with psychosocial conditions in the DPRK were not granted, despite numerous requests (Devandas Aguilar, 2017, p. 15). Explorations of the topic in literature suggest that the human rights situation of individuals with these conditions is just as poor, if not worse than those with physical ailments.

This dissertation explores the topic of disability rights in the DPRK through examining the implications of various facets of North Korean life for disabled people, including the lack of access to healthcare and advocacy, humanitarian issues, representation of disability in the media, the legal framework around disability, the institutional lives of disabled people, as well as the implications of the country's *Juche* ideology and leadership. In the following literature review, it is understood that authoritarian states' treatment of those with disabilities has historically been extremely poor in a wide variety of areas, from poorly equipped healthcare systems to the low social status accorded to disabled people. The DPRK is no exception to this, and the state should enact significant reforms to rectify its shortcomings. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to answer the question of “how can the DPRK government improve its current disability rights situation and foster a more inclusive environment?”.

II. Literature Review

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes around the world have been held largely responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses in the world. Armstrong (2019) observes that authoritarian regimes all across the globe often, but not always, commit grave offences by starting conflicts, terrorizing dissidents, persecuting minorities and misusing resources that would be best used elsewhere (Armstrong, 2019, p. 307). Authoritarian regimes' consistent lack of recognition and respect for the rights of those with disabilities is a significant aspect of their human rights violations.

Existing literature written on the status of those with disabilities in authoritarian regimes reveals a fundamental lack of respect for these individuals' right to life and equal opportunities in society. In understanding the situation of disability rights in the DPRK, as this dissertation aims to accomplish, it is important to consider this topic in relation to other authoritarian and communist countries.

Material Conditions for Disabled People in Authoritarian States

Arguably the worst example of state-sanctioned mistreatment of disabled people in recent history was the treatment of disabled people in Nazi Germany. Mostert (2002) details the many abuses of human rights for those with disabilities committed under this regime, including the infamous "Aktion T-4" involuntary euthanasia programme in which tens of thousands of disabled people were murdered (Mostert, 2002, p. 167). Gallagher (2001) explores how, in Nazi Germany, people with severe disabilities were stripped of their bodily autonomy, as well as being denied all control over their lives and how they were treated (Gallagher, 2001, p. 98). While they have not generally taken it as far as the Nazi regime did, governments of many other authoritarian states have often been responsible for a very poor quality of life for disabled people.

Disabled people in authoritarian regimes often live physically and psychologically isolated lives. For example, Philips writes that the Soviet Union tended to place residential care facilities for disabled people in rural areas, contributing to significant social isolation (Philips, 2009). The majority of disabled people in modern-day China have also historically been situated in rural areas where there is often a greatly reduced standard of living (Campbell & Uren, 2011, pp. 12-13). Access to healthcare has also been a significant issue in authoritarian regimes. For example, modern-day Turkmenistan, where healthcare facilities have suffered from years of underfunding and inefficient, obsolete methods of treatment, many people, often those in rural areas, have not been given access to basic healthcare (Rechel & McKee, 2005, p. 26). Similarly, Mishra et al explore how the fact that the majority of rehabilitation facilities in Tajikistan have historically been located in major urban centres has been a significant barrier to over 70 per cent of the population living in remote areas without the means to travel (Mishra et al., 2018, p. 206). Rowland and Telyukov also state that, while free healthcare was a constitutional right in the Soviet Union (as is true for other communist states), its healthcare system suffered from prolonged underfunding, antiquated facilities, a poor standard of equipment and inadequate supplies, as well as a lack of consumer satisfaction (Rowland & Telyukov, 1991, p. 72, 75).

Soltani et al. explore the many barriers to accessing healthcare faced by disabled people in Iran, quoting one physically disabled person as saying “you must have a connection in a hospital in order to force them to do something for you” (Soltani et al., 2017, p. 3). Stigma and denial of disability also play a role. For example, families of children with intellectual disabilities in Iran often do not accept their child’s condition and therefore do not facilitate treatment (Soltani et al., 2017, pp 3-4). There was also a consensus among participants in this study that a lack of awareness around the culture of disability and how to properly treat people with disabilities has created a barrier to such individuals accessing healthcare (Soltani et al., 2017, p. 5). As well as this, there has been a general lack of interest among policymakers in addressing the challenges faced by those with disabilities, with one policymaker being quoted as saying that the government prefer not to spend time on such issues, instead focusing on “media and promotional activities” (Soltani et al., 2017 p. 5), and it could be argued that this is characteristic of the proclivity of authoritarian governments to place emphasis on optics rather than actually taking practical steps to resolve issues. Authoritarian states’ sanctioning by the international community can also complicate service provision, such as in Cuba where healthcare was impacted negatively by the cessation of

economic assistance from the Soviet Union due to its collapse in the early 1990s and the increased effects of U.S sanctions on the country (Brice, 2008, p. 119).

Almalki, Fitzgerald & Clark state that, despite it being ranked the 26th best healthcare system in the world, access to healthcare is also a major area of concern in Saudi Arabia, stating that there is a significant lack of services for disadvantaged groups such as those with disabilities and special needs (Almalki et al., 2011, p. 785, 791). Many authoritarian states have also been mired in armed conflict, which further complicates access to services. A major example of this is in Syria, with many in the displaced Syrian population suffering from chronic disability and disease for which they may only receive limited care (Taleb et al, 2014, p. 68). Even before its civil war took hold on a wide scale, Syria's healthcare system was severely inadequate, with 2010 seeing only 1.5 physicians and hospital beds available per 1,000 people and only 0.5 psychiatrists per 100,000 (Taleb et al., 2014, p. 65). Recent attempts at liberalisation of the healthcare system have also led to wider inequality in accessing care (Taleb et al., 2014, p. 64).

It is also important to take into account that revolution is a major hallmark of authoritarian states, and Colgan & Weeks posit that when revolutions result in the appointing of a personalist dictatorship, those countries typically create more international armed conflict in the first ten years following the revolution than when other kinds of political systems arise (Colgan & Weeks, 2015, p. 164). The fact that these states have such a great proclivity to engage in conflict obviously has the implication that more instances of disability can be created in the form of war casualties, and authoritarian states have also historically demonstrated a disparity in treatment of those who have become disabled through conflict and those who have acquired medical conditions from other circumstances. For example, the Soviet model of disability created a social hierarchy in which the veterans of WW2 were situated at the top, followed by those of other military conflicts, then officials of other government forces such as the KGB and, lastly, those injured through workplace accidents and other instances of violence, as well as people who were born with their disabilities who did not have anyone else to blame (Philips, 2009). This has also been true in the Iranian context, with Soltani et al finding that people who acquired disability through military conflict have been able to access free healthcare services, whereas those with conditions such as congenital disabilities have had to pay (Soltani et al., 2017, p. 5). Pons et al also observe the link between armed conflict and disability rights, exploring the fact that people with disabilities are often targeted for mass killing during armed conflicts, citing the Rwandan

genocide and its killing of people living in psychiatric units and rehabilitation facilities as an example (Pons et al., 2022, p. 62).

People with mental health conditions living in authoritarian regimes also often do not receive the treatment they require, largely because of the low social status accorded to people with these conditions in such regimes. For example, Chen, Chen and Hu posit that, in China, mental health has not garnered the attention it deserves as a result of stigma and neglect (Chen et al., 2022, p. 329). The state of Eritrea is another example, and Amahazion states that despite a rise in mental health issues in the country, stigma is often a significant barrier to treatment and mental health facilities in the country exist only in very limited numbers (Amahazion, 2021, pp. 2-3).

Social Status of Disabled People in Authoritarian Regimes

A significant amount of literature reveals that, in authoritarian regimes, a low social status is typically attached to those with disabilities. For example, there has been a significant amount of cultural stigma surrounding disability in China. Campbell & Uren explore how traditional Chinese culture places significance on the specific cause of a person's disability, that disabilities are often linked to previous wrongdoing and that they have been a significant cause for guilt and shame in families (Campbell & Uren, 2011, p. 14). A similar attitude is also often observed in Saudi Arabia. For example, disabled girls have been hidden away in their homes as they could be perceived as undesirable to their sister's marriage interests (Al-Jadid, 2013, p. 455). The obscuring of people with disabilities also occurs in Syrian and Iraqi contexts, with individuals being viewed as entirely defined by their disability and unworthy of the public eye (Dew et al., 2020, p. 2859). In the Communist context, Khmer Rouge-era Cambodia is an example of a state that placed high importance on an individual's "usefulness" and ability to work, with disability and sickness being perceived as "impediments to the revolution". (Tyner, 2014, p. 74). A social stigma towards disability and being the parent of a disabled person also exists in Cuba, where a parent may hide their child at home away from public view. There has also been a common belief that disability "can be attributed to past sins" (Brice, 2008, pp. 119-120). A significant cultural stigma around disability also exists in Laos, with many Laotians believing that disabled people cannot contribute and that they are a burden to society, largely because of the fact that Laos has an

agrarian-based economy with many jobs requiring manual labour (Hinton & Rutherford, 2014, p. 26). In Vietnam, despite the government's recent policies intended to bring about greater social inclusion of disabled people, many barriers still exist such as a social stigma partly stemming from spiritual beliefs, compounded by a lack of effective infrastructure (Bogenschutz et al., 2021, p. 719). Much of the stigma experienced by disabled people in any kind of political climate, not just in authoritarian countries, comes from the concept of disability as a defect. For example, the conflation of disability and defectiveness was extremely common in the USSR (Gaines, 2004, p. 84). L.S Vygotsky's scientific discipline for the study of disability, known as defectology, was highly significant. This is a framework in which disability was viewed through the lens of deficiency, such as in its use of outdated terms such as "oligophrenia" and "mental retardation" (Smagorinsky, 2012, p. 2). Defectology as a framework to understanding disability saw great popularity in the USSR, as well as many other socialist states (Lubovsky, 1974, p. 300).

Legal Frameworks

Alongside pervasive cultural stigmas, authoritarian states often have a poor legal framework or poor implementation of a framework for the protection of disability rights. For example, Al-Jadid posits that, in Saudi Arabia, those with disabilities are legally entitled to free medical, educational, social and rehabilitative services but that these laws are not implemented well, the actual provision of services is sometimes poor and special education for disabled people is lacking (Al-Jadid, 2013, p. 458). Despite the fact that China has enacted a variety of laws that protect disabled people and has been awarded the Special Prize of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, its laws have been criticised for being too general, which has resulted in a disparity between policy and practice (Campbell & Uren, 2011, p. 15). As well as this, Carney states that in the early 2010s, when Russia first ratified the CRPD, it was in violation of some of its provisions due to the fact that it did not have a sufficient disability rights framework and lacked infrastructure for disabled people to use. The state did eventually recognise this and has since enacted sufficiently far-reaching legislation but there have been issues with actually enacting these laws and thousands of people have not been able to access services that the state should pay for, such as interpreters and accessible routes (Carney, 2020, pp. 601-602).

Disability in Korea

Understanding the situation of Korea as a whole, rather than solely the North, is also necessary to properly contextualise the DPRK's disability rights situation. Yoo posits that, until recently, socially vulnerable people in Korea, especially the disabled, have been perceived as an "unnecessary burden" for the community. He states that, throughout history, there have been both significant negative and positive perceptions of those with disabilities, but that the negative views started to overtake the positive ones throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Yoo, 2023, p. 22) and that the state's rough treatment of the disabled in the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for "outright discrimination" against disabled people to take place in modern Korea (Yoo, 2023, p. 2). In the South, progress on disability rights was hampered due to decades of authoritarian rule following the Korean War armistice, and there were many grassroots efforts to improve conditions. From the perspective of Chun Doo-hwan, the former South Korean authoritarian president who was in power from 1980 to 1988, improving the state's support for disabled people was an important factor in his vision for transforming Korea into an advanced country with a modern support network, but activists still continued to criticise disability reform as unsatisfactory (Arrington, 2021, p. 234-235).

Conclusion

Literature written on the topic overwhelmingly reinforces the idea that rights for people with disabilities in authoritarian states have generally been poorly realised, with many of these states demonstrating pervasive cultural stigmas, poor standards of healthcare and inadequate service provision for individuals with physical and psychological conditions. In such states, disability issues are often considered taboo and the stigma around mental health is especially pervasive. For the DPRK, the subject of this paper, to become well-rounded in providing disability rights would make it an outlier from other authoritarian states and this paper aims to set out some ways this could be accomplished.

III. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that explores the treatment of disabled people in the DPRK and pathways to the advancement of disability rights in the country. This research takes a qualitative form because the author wishes to understand the lived experience of disabled people in a variety of different facets and use this to identify pathways for improvement in the situation, rather than viewing the subject solely through a statistical lens that, while still useful, would often not provide enough depth in understanding of the lived experience. This research takes the form of a case study (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301) that explores the case of the DPRK as an example of an authoritarian state that heavily represses disability rights.

This research taking the form of a case study means it can take a holistic view of the issue (Noor, 2008, p. 1603). Due to the fact that it encompasses a very wide-ranging group of individuals, an area as broad as disability rights requires a holistic view, which I aim to provide in the following chapter.

Data Collection

In this study, the author examines existing literature that explores what life looks like for disabled people in the DPRK and what government policies exist that shape the sociopolitical climate in which these individuals live. The author examines a range of primary and secondary sources to identify key factors affecting the rights of disabled people in the DPRK. Sources employed include news reports, journal articles and reports published by NGOs working in the human rights field. Examples of sources used include white papers published by the Korea Institute for National Unification and Korea Risk Group's *NK Pro* research resources. Resources used in the author's search for existing literature include JSTOR and Google Scholar.

Limitations

This research holds some significant, but by no means prohibitive, limitations. Most obviously is my lack of ability to be an eyewitness of the subject matter, as a result of my physical distance from the country this research focuses on. The DPRK is also notorious for its information control and has been criticised for its non-disclosure of information about its human rights situation to the international community, such as in its non-engagement with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK (Woodward, 2024). The fact that there is very little information available on the country's facilities for the treatment of those with psychiatric conditions (Park et al., 2014, p. 363) is also a highly significant limitation, as possessing adequate information in this regard would allow the author a greater understanding of the situation of subsections of the disabled community that face a particularly high level of stigma. Another significant limitation in this study is that the author's proficiency in Korean is not sufficient to explore Korean-language literature, and is therefore limited to solely utilising English-language resources. This significantly, but not unreasonably, reduces the amount of literature available for the author to examine and means that the author may not receive uniquely native Korean insights throughout the study, which may cause some gaps in cultural understanding.

Justification of Research

The DPRK's poor treatment of human rights is something that continues to be an area of significant concern from the international community (United Nations, 2023), and it is vital that disability rights are adequately represented in this discussion. The author has also been unable to find any English-language literature that explores DPRK disability rights in the content of the international neurodiversity movement and he believes this is an area of major unmet need as the movement gains traction worldwide (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008)

Theoretical Framework

Significant in the understanding of discrimination against disabled people in authoritarian settings (including the DPRK) is David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's theory of

“ablenationalism”. Coined in 2010, this theory asserts that the concept of nationhood and ableism have started to become conflated since the late nineteenth century, and this theory can be described as “the degree to which treating people with disabilities as an exception valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2010, p. 113). In other words, it explores the idea that being able-bodied is the norm and the expected precondition to being included and treated and a full citizen of a state. It could be argued that the way in which those with disabilities are treated in the DPRK, such as the abandonment, isolation and even denial of right to life of those with disabilities is reflective of a social and governmental view that they are unworthy of the same participation in the country’s society, making it important to understand the situation of disability rights in the country with regard to the DPRK’s national identity.

Another facet to the poor climate of disability rights in the DPRK is that the country’s citizens cannot in many ways freely access foreign information and therefore do not have access to the *neurodiversity* movement. This movement, originating from the work of Australian sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s, posits that differences in cognition should be more socially accepted, that the traditional view of conditions such as Autism as deficits is outdated, and that these conditions are normal variations in the development of the brain. This movement has led to increasing awareness of human rights issues for those with these conditions and is extremely important in disability rights discourse because it has garnered immense popularity all around the world (Harris, 2023).

IV. Case Analysis

Access to Services and the Role of International Aid

Access to healthcare is among the most important factors in disability rights, and the DPRK is ill-equipped to provide adequate healthcare for many of its citizens, with hospitals often lacking the necessary medicines and equipment to provide effective treatment (OCHA, 2020, p. 14). The lack of equipment in the DPRK’s hospitals means that, especially with recent reduction of aid due to COVID-19, there has likely been a major unmet need for foreign governments and NGOs to provide the DPRK with many of the supplies it requires to

promote a healthier population. Previously, medical aid from South Korea has been greatly beneficial. To assist the DPRK's underdeveloped healthcare system, the South Korean government has provided support such as authorising the World Health Organisation to release £4.32m to equip the North's hospitals in 2011 (BBC, 2011). Unfortunately, with the Workers Party of Korea's recent abandonment of reunification and declaration of relations with the ROK as being between "two belligerent states at war" (Oh, 2024, p. 2), it is unlikely that aid such as this from the South will be permitted. The current situation may also complicate aid from the United States, which may have a largely detrimental impact in various areas.

With the ongoing relaxation of border controls following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that international aid organisations such as NGOs re-enter the country and restart their activities. Organisations that have worked successfully in the DPRK include Handicap International (HI), with a view to build on physical rehabilitative services and enhance teaching at schools for deaf and blind children. Handicap International began operating in the country in March 2001. The Red Cross has also played the role of providing assistance to DPRK-based Orthopaedic centres, opening a new physical rehabilitation centre in Pyongyang and establishing an amputee rehabilitation programme. A German organisation named TOGETHER, also known as the Educational Center for Deaf, Blind and Nondisabled Children, has also partnered with the KFPD, with their stated aims to be to provide training to deaf and blind people, as well as helping to foster a more inclusive environment (Zellweger, 2014, pp. 30-35).

Present in the DPRK's healthcare system is a degree of preferential treatment towards those of a higher social status, and healthcare has been described as being comprised of "two levels of service". For example, a new eye hospital in Pyongyang reportedly has a floor dedicated entirely to veterans and others who have the means to pay (Ford, 2023). There is also a disparity in access to services and realisation of rights between people living in Pyongyang and those in more rural areas (Devandas Aguilar, 2017, p. 5), meaning it could be argued that the government do care about disability issues, but more so when it serves to keep the elite and their families satisfied and thus loyal to the regime. Another very important facet to consider is that the DPRK's psychiatric care system is shrouded in mystery, largely kept hidden from the international community. Park et al. state that the care system is "based on

the legacy of Soviet psychiatry” (Park et al., 2014, p. 363), and there is a significant stigma attached to mental illness in DPRK society. Those living with such conditions are sent to the state’s psychiatric hospitals, often referred to as “No. 49 hospitals”. (Lee, 2015). The cultural stigma around mental health is such that there is a widespread attitude of neurotic disorders being seen as stemming from an individual’s failure to demonstrate willpower. Depression and anxiety disorders are generally not treated particularly well in the DPRK. Priority is instead assigned to more severe diseases because of the DPRK’s economic challenges and conditions presenting a clear, physical threat to life receive more attention in the medical sphere (Park et al., 2014, p. 366). The DPRK government’s almost complete lack of transparency around the treatment of those with psychiatric conditions is deeply concerning and is likely indicative that the government has something to hide. It is vital that the DPRK government respects its own constitution and demonstrates a commitment to looking after its citizens, irrespective of their background.

The DPRK is severely lacking in its treatment of Article 18 of the CRPD, which stipulates that those with disabilities should have the right to freedom of movement and to leave or return to their country as they desire (CRPD, 2006). A permit must first be obtained to travel long distances in the DPRK, and leaving the country at will is illegal (United Nations, 2014, p. 19). This may cause disabled people to encounter difficulties in accessing services useful to them (Devandas Aguilar, 2017, p. 5). It could also be argued that the DPRK has demonstrated Mitchell & Snyder’s theory of ablenationalism by placing disabled people in more isolated places in the countryside and not regarding them as fully-fledged citizens (Lord et al, 2016, p. 47). This is in contravention of Article 26 of the CPRD, which emphasises the right of disabled people to equal inclusion and participation in all areas of life, as well as Article 19, which enshrines the right of disabled people to choose their place of residence and to not be obligated to a specific living arrangement (CPRD, 2006).

The DPRK has also had significant challenges in accessibility, such as in a lack of availability of assistive devices and prosthetics (Kim & Woo, 2018, p. 6). Zellweger (2014) also states that more work is generally needed to make buildings and streets accessible. These issues work together to make it very difficult for disabled people to integrate into society and

there are certain provinces where the situation is so poor that those with disabilities are left confined in their homes (Zellweger, 2014, p. 14).

Self-Advocacy and the KFPD

A pervasive cultural stigma against disabled people exists in the DPRK. Signs of weakness are considered shameful and people who are viewed as not contributing to society are looked down upon (Devandas Aguilar, 2017, p. 9). It is also worth noting that the DPRK's lack of freedom of movement hinders self-advocacy by limiting freedom of assembly. This makes the work of advocacy organisations extremely important. The Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled (KFPD) is the largest advocacy organisation for people with disabilities in the DPRK. The Blind Association of Korea, the Deaf Association of Korea, the Korean Art Association for the Disabled, the Korean Rehabilitation Centre for Children with Disabilities, the Korean Association for Sports of the Disabled and the Korean Company Supporting the Disabled are all organisations associated with the KFPD (Lee et al., 2022, pp. 564-565). The KFPD considers itself an NGO, but staff salaries, benefits and some costs relating to the operation of the organisation are covered by the Ministry of Health, which calls its independence into question (Zellweger, 2014, p. 17). For people with disabilities to be adequately represented, the separation of the KFPD from the DPRK government should be verified and maintained. It is also vital that more similar organisations are established, as having a variety of NGOs that specialise in a wide variety of areas of disability will ensure that people are appropriately advocated for. The need for a more specialised advocacy organisation is especially significant for North Koreans with psychiatric conditions who see little representation in society.

To combat the stigma around disability, particularly for those with psychological conditions, cultural exchange in which foreigners with these conditions would meet North Koreans to help lift the veil on their experiences would likely be beneficial. In the cultural sphere, the KFPD provides enrichment opportunities for disabled people, such as facilitating the formation of performance troupes to give live performances, sometimes abroad. For example, one such group, named the "Young Artists Para-Ensemble" toured the UK and France in 2015 in a collaboration between the DPRK government and UK-based charity DULA International. In one performance, twelve disabled North Koreans sung, performed ballet and

played instrumental pieces alongside other British and North Korean musicians. (Hughes Hall, 2015). While cultural exchanges such as these are valuable in that they showcase the unique skills and talents of disabled people, they are likely to have only a limited impact on perceptions of disability unless the artwork or performances are allowed to tell stories of life with a disability, as opposed to solely being displays of virtuosity. In the DPRK, art is heavily propagandised (Pantelić, 2016). It is therefore unlikely, for example, that such a group would be allowed to undertake a performance that explores themes of ostracism from society experienced by an individual with a neurodivergent condition such as Autism, as social cohesion is of utmost importance in DPRK society. It is also unlikely that such a performance would be allowed to explore themes of depression or anxiety, as it would not be conducive to the governments' vision of a happy society where all of life's hardships are taken care of by the state. State promotion of musicians and artists exploring these issues in their work would be a powerful way to educate and engage the North Korean public in disability rights issues, and the KFPD could work in partnership with the government to help them understand that opportunities to free artistic expression for disabled people is essential to their wellbeing.

Implications of Humanitarian Issues on Disability

As has often been reported in the media, the DPRK has had serious issues around food insecurity, especially since the late 1980s. This has also recently gotten significantly worse over the last few years, with Hazel Smith describing the current situation as likely to be “a humanitarian crisis unfolding behind North Korea’s closed borders “(Smith, 2021, p. 59). Chronic food insecurity can cause physical and cognitive developmental issues, and nutritional deficits can also exacerbate existing disabilities. It is for these reasons that international food aid is a key area in promotion of disability rights in the DPRK. In 2021, reports emerged from the country of elderly people and those with disabilities dying of starvation (Human Rights Watch, 2024, p. 115). Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are another major component of food insecurity, with the DPRK’s population currently going through a very difficult time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The food insecurity crisis is one of the ways that the failures of the authoritarian system not only strip away the rights of those with disabilities, but also cause disability to occur in the population.

The effects of international sanctions are in many ways disproportionately affecting people with disabilities. Zadeh-Cummings posits that the impact of sanctions has been the primary reason for humanitarian aid organisations leaving the country. Sanctions also have an impact on equipment provision, with an example being the California-based Kinsler Foundation encountering difficulties with sending wheelchairs, crutches and canes to the country. The organisation has stated that a ban on sending metallic objects to the DPRK had stopped them from conducting these activities, and that donors had stopped funding the foundation due to being “afraid of breaking the rules” (Strother, 2019). It is for this reason that a new approach to sanctions, either in their lifting or modification to reduce their impact on disability rights, is important to improving the situation in the country.

Recently, tensions on the Korean peninsula have risen significantly, with the Workers’ Party of Korea officially abandoning the goal of Korean reunification and declaring the DPRK’s relations with its southern counterpart as “hostile relations between two nations at war” (Oh, 2024, p. 2). This is likely to have a significant impact on future humanitarian aid in the medical and food insecurity fields. There has also recently been discussion about whether Pyongyang’s recent threats are not actually the kind of “typical bluster” we are used to seeing. Robert Carlin and Siegfried Hecker posit that the current situation on the Korean peninsula is unusually dangerous and that “Kim Jong Un has made the strategic decision to go to war” (Carlin & Hecker, 2024). The re-ignition of armed conflict on the peninsula has the potential to greatly harm the already-strained quality of life faced by those with disabilities, such as by disrupting healthcare facilities. The UN Security Council has also now formally recognised that those with disabilities face a disproportionate level of risk during armed conflicts, which could be a helpful factor in the prosecuting of crimes against humanity (Pons et al., 2022, p. 61). This may need to happen if a new armed conflict arises. Alongside causing a significant rise of incidence in physical disability in civilians and military personnel, a potential future armed conflict would also be likely to greatly exacerbate poverty and mental health issues.

Representation of Disability in the Media and Realising the Potential of Disabled People

Representation of disability in the DPRK’s media is lacking, with disabled people rarely making appearances, except in limited circumstances such as when reporting on “exemplary

individuals” assisting soldiers or others with disabilities (Chung & Reddy, 2023). State media’s shallow representation of those with disabilities as people who are looked after and given “happy lives” by the state has been criticised as a kind of facade that serves to prevent unrest and respond to the international community’s “human rights offensive” (Min, 2015). State media has also been known to use disability-related language that may be considered offensive. For example, English-language editions of state publications such as the *Rodong Sinmun* and the *Pyongyang Times* feature articles with headlines such as “Crippled Girl of Yesterday to be a Student” (Rodong Sinmun, 2022) and “Spasmodic Symptom of Mental Cripple” (derogatorily referring to a South Korean ex-foreign minister) (Chol, 2017). State media also makes frequent reference to individuals it refers to as “mentally deranged”. A search of this term on an archive of DPRK state media returns 224 results (KCNA Watch, 2024). News articles around the topic of neurodivergence are rare. For example, a search of the term “ADHD” returns only one result in the form of an article published by *Arirang Meari* about a rise in “mental illness” among South Korean children (KCNA Watch, 2021), which is an example of communist states’ tendency to attribute psychological conditions with the failings of capitalism, such as in the politicisation of Soviet psychiatry (Park et al., 2014, p. 364). Sensitizing state media to disability issues, such as in stopping using offensive terms would help to advance disability rights by helping an entire subsection of society to no longer feel as alienated and left behind. Rather than merely presenting its ideal vision of disability such as in its preferential coverage of “honoured veterans” instead of ordinary civilians, the DPRK government should take measures to ensure that state media frequently portrays ordinary people with disabilities and that many different facets of their lives and struggle are explored, in order to educate the populace sufficiently in disability issues. More discussion around mental health in state media would be very beneficial, as the belief of concepts such as suicide being a “treasonous act” are not helpful in addressing these issues (Paraschakis & Katsanos, 2015, p. 1).

Across much of the world, there is a growing discussion of neurodevelopmental conditions such as Autism and ADHD as part of the neurodiversity movement. This is becoming increasingly true in South Korea with media such as the award-winning TV programme *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* helping to promote discussion of these issues in a society in which many people view the topic as a taboo (Young, 2022). This is also one of the ways that the DPRK’s notoriously stringent information control harms those with disabilities, by separating them from international discourse about their conditions and what they mean for

themselves and wider society. A young DPRK citizen may never be exposed to empowering media such as *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* and may grow up believing their condition is a curse that contributes nothing to society and is only worthy of sympathy rather than celebration. North Koreans' lack of access to internet spaces specifically for those with disabilities will also contribute to their isolation and prevent them from effectively organising together to make a change in their sociopolitical climate.

It could be argued that an individual living in an authoritarian state such as North Korea having a neurodivergent condition such as Autism is inherently very politically charged. In a country that boasts of “single-minded unity” under the regime being its “best asset” (KCNA Watch, 2021), there is a little room for those who think differently. Establishing the neurodiversity movement in the DPRK would be beneficial not just in the promotion of the mental health of those with disabilities, but in a multitude of other ways. For example, harnessing the diverse talents of these individuals will enhance the workforce and have a positive impact on economic development. Although allowing the neurodiversity movement to establish itself in North Korea could be of significant usefulness in helping individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions to realise their strengths and potential, there are many barriers to its success. Kim & Gillespie-Lynch posit that the pervasive prioritisation of academic and professional competition, a high pressure to conform to societal norms in South Korea (and surely also in the North), as well as concerns about how autistic students could influence the academic performance of others may be factors in many Koreans believing that the neurodiversity movement is not well-suited to Korean society. An increasing amount of evidence points to “public autism stigma”, measured by the distance people want from autistic individuals, is much higher in South Korea, as well as Japan, Lebanon and Malaysia (Kim & Gillespie-Lynch, 2023, pp. 4199-4200).

According to the DPRK's 2018 report to the CRPD, 58.4 per cent of the country's citizens aged between 17 and 59 who have a disability were economically active (Lee et al., 2024, p. 558). While this number is not terribly dire, there is still significant room for improvement. The situation may be improved by building more effective policies that assist disabled people in obtaining work. The DPRK government, as part of its strategy of care for disabled people, does have a system for allocating such individuals with jobs. For instance, factories have been opened specifically for disabled people to find work, such as in the establishment of “light workplaces” in which individuals with conditions such as polio have been able to work in a less labour-intensive way (Lee et al., 2020, p. 472). If the DPRK government were to

enact a scheme to provide people with conditions such as Autism and ADHD with work that suits their needs, the quality of life of those with these conditions is likely to increase significantly. In the western media, the concept of the “Autistic genius” whose condition helps them in their job or allows them to excel in a particular interest has been explored extensively (Gambacurta, 2020). People with neurodiverse conditions are often noted for possessing great skill in areas that require pattern recognition and logical thinking (Austin & Pisano, 2017) and could assist in areas such as the country’s growing interest in information technology, as well as areas such as healthcare and scientific research. People with neurodiverse conditions can also have unique skills and perspectives in the arts (Webb, 2023), which could go a long way in bolstering the country’s lack of soft power on the world stage.

Taking more action in the field of disability rights and providing disabled people with more opportunities may also help the DPRK government to maintain a positive reputation or to regain this reputation among disabled people who have lost confidence in it. The Workers Party of Korea is often known as the “motherly party” that is supposed to be “devoting its all to offering people a civilised and happy life” (Sim, 2023).

Disability in Law and Welfare

The Law on the Protection of Persons with Disability defines disabled people as citizens who experience severe impediments in leading a normal life for an extended period of time through limitation or loss of mental or physical function and, in this law, the state pledges to protect such people (KFPD, n.d.). There are also numerous mechanisms in place to provide material support to them. Disabled people are included in the state’s social security framework, but it has been criticised as lacklustre. Although it may appear somewhat robust from a legal perspective, the law is poorly implemented and “fails to fulfil its functions”. Support for those who are economically inactive due to disability or illness is generally of a poor quality and those who become unable to work due to industrial accidents are not provided with adequate compensation. The framework also lacks an adequate emergency welfare system, which means that those facing economic hardship may have no choice but to be dependent on their own resources, which presents a very real threat to people’s livelihoods (Lee et al., 2022, p. 23). For someone with a disability, this threat may be much greater and they may face a worsening of their condition or be pushed further into poverty. In order for

people with disabilities to be given a better quality of life, the state's welfare system requires significant improvement. The DPRK government should look at how to make its framework more robust and effectively deliverable. Japan, the DPRK's neighbour, has a more substantial safety net for those with physical and learning disabilities, and adults with severe mental disabilities have been entitled to over ¥26,000 per month if they have an income of less than ¥3.4 million. Families of disabled children under twenty have been in receipt of ¥50,050 or ¥33,330 per month depending on the disability's severity. Disabled people have also been allowed discounts on expenses such as telecommunications and public transport fees (McCurry et al., 2015). Although the two countries have vastly different political systems, there may be much for the DPRK to learn from the Japanese model.

Despite the fact that the DPRK's legal framework around disability has been criticised, the issue is continuing to be discussed within government, as was evidenced by the adoption of a new 75-clause law in September 2023. It states that those with disabilities should be free to live in places that suit their lifestyles and health, as well as travel according to their wishes. It also states that the workload of disabled individuals should be less than for others, as well as prohibits their mobilisation in forced labour campaigns and guarantees their right to vote and submit petitions to the government. Interestingly, the law also states that women who have disabilities are protected in their "right to give birth" (Chung & Reddy, 2023).

There is a significant intersection between the rights of those with disabilities and those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Although non-heterosexual relations are not explicitly prohibited by law (Hotham, 2013), DPRK citizens that identify as LGBTQ+ may face social stigma (Lee, 2015) and concerns exist that the country's laws around decency and obscenity may be used to prosecute LGBTQ+ people (Outright International, n.d.). LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to have a mental disability, with their systemic oppression playing a major role (Rodríguez-Roldán, 2020, p. 436). The situation of LGBTQ+ rights in the DPRK is unlikely to change any time soon, as many people in the country have not been adequately aware of the social existence of LGBTQ+ individuals (Hotham, 2013). There would have to be a significant ideological shift in the Workers Party of Korea for these rights to be recognised.

It is also important to take into consideration the intersection between disability and women's rights issues. The consequences of disability can be more serious for women, as they can be discriminated against on the grounds of both their disability and their gender. They may encounter significant obstacles in accessing education, healthcare and other services as a result (Kim & Woo, 2018, p. 6). The situation of women's rights in the DPRK is in many ways bleak, with the government doing little to improve the situation despite it claiming otherwise (Gang & Hozaniak, 2018, p. 9). Article 16.5 of the CRPD states that state parties should implement laws, including women and child-specific legislation, to protect those with disabilities from exploitation and violence (CPRD, 2006). Laws relevant to disability and women's rights such as the Persons With Disability Rights Protection Law and the Women's Rights Protection Law do briefly mention this intersection, but would benefit from going into greater depth (Gang, 2020) (KFPD, n.d.). The DPRK government should listen to viewpoints from the CRPD committee, the international community, as well as its own public, to devise ways in which the law can be amended to rectify these shortcomings.

Institutional Life of Disabled People

Disability is also a major issue in the DPRK's prison system, with prolonged hard labour contributing to physical health conditions. The reportedly harsh physical punishment endured by many people in these camps are also a contributor (Lord et al., 2016, p. 49). The DPRK's prison system is known for its physically and mentally-taxing environment. A recent study of 259 North Koreans between 2021 and 2023 revealed that 25 per cent of detainees with disabilities surveyed were subject to forced labour activities such as logging and farming without any regard to their condition, and Ministry of Social Security officials were identified as those most commonly involved in rights violations against those with disabilities (Korea Future, 2024, p. 2).

Someone with a condition such as Autism may find the prison system to be an unbearable environment, which may cause them to "melt down", therefore impacting their interpersonal relationships with other inmates and potentially having an impact on their performance in prison labour, which may cause them to be sanctioned. Violent punishment in the DPRK's prison camps is not uncommon. For example, one woman imprisoned between 2013 and 2015 reported picking something up from the floor to eat and was then beaten to the point

that she was “unable to move her back”, and another reported experiencing “frequent violence” when they were not able to work to a high enough standard or comply well with the rules, which caused long term health issues (Han et al., 2018, p. 101). On top of this, refugee testimony reveals that medical care for detainees has sometimes been denied, resulting in death (United Nations, 2021, p. 11). The government should allow human rights monitors to inspect the conditions inside the country’s prisons and ensure its treatment of detainees complies with the law. Additionally, it should work to establish an environment that reduces physical and sensory strain on disabled and neurodiverse people.

The DPRK has been described as one of the most militarised countries in the world (DIA, 2021, p. 5) and it maintains a policy of compulsory military service. According to Tertitskiy, at the age of fifteen, North Korean students are required to undergo a preliminary health check and those who qualify are summoned for another one a couple of years later. The students’ school is then notified of the results and the individuals deemed fit for service are called into the Korean People’s Army (KPA), given a final check-up and then issued with uniform before finally being taken to a boot camp (Tertitskiy, 2022, pp. 106-107). Life in the KPA is one of rigid routine and structure that is “isolated from the rest of society” (Tertitskiy, 2022, p. 124). Much like the armies of many other countries, exercises undertaken by soldiers include shooting, press-ups and long-distance running, as well as ideological education. (Tertitskiy, 2022, p. 115). The DPRK government also frequently uses soldiers for the purposes of cheap labour on farms, construction sites and mines. Conscription often lasts around ten years, and life as a soldier is harsh (Kim, 2023). With regards to soldiers contacting home, the KPA is one of the world’s most limiting militaries. Opportunities to visit home are scarce, but telephone calls are often made under the supervision of superiors (Tertitskiy, 2022, p. 131). Someone with a neurodivergent condition such as Autism, or someone with mental health issues such as an anxiety or depressive disorder (likely to be undiagnosed in the DPRK) is likely to find this extremely distressing. The fact that neurodivergent conditions receive such little attention and are therefore likely to be under-diagnosed in the DPRK means that many people may end up in a military environment that is unsuitable and potentially even unsafe for them to be in. Many countries around the world restrict the enlisting of these individuals into the army, such as in the UK where conditions such as Autism and ADHD may be a bar to entering the service (UK Parliament, 2009), and in the US, where those with traits that may impede their ability to serve are barred (Zauderer,

2023). Providing greater access to diagnoses and incorporating awareness of neurodiverse conditions into the selection process is likely to prevent the military placing neurodiverse individuals in situations where harm may come to them.

It is also important to consider that the military is one of the DPRK's major examples of Mitchell & Snyder's theory of ablenationalism, with the Socialist Constitution stating that defense of the country is "the supreme duty and honour of citizens" (Gang, 2020) and Kim Jong Un emphasising the concept of the army as the source of the country's "greatest honour and pride", stressing that the "Juche revolution" relies on a powerful army to resist imperialism (Kim, 2022, p. 2, 4). People with disabilities are of course excluded from this source of great pride and duty. With the recent rise in tensions between the DPRK, the Republic of Korea and the U.S, the role of the army in North Korean society may become more important, and its ablenationalistic functions could become more pronounced.

Implications of the State's Leadership and Juche Thought on Disability Rights

It could be argued that the DPRK's maltreatment of disabled people is in many ways not only a humanitarian issue, but a fundamental betrayal of the core principles of communism. In 1875, Karl Marx, an originator of many of the theories the DPRK claims to ground itself on, wrote that a communist society would inscribe on its banners the slogan "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (Marx, 2022, p. 59). This has been interpreted as meaning that individuals should work for the common good of society in the way they see fit, and that people should be compensated for their individual needs rather than their contribution (Badger, 2023). It could be argued that this slogan provides even more basis for the DPRK government to provide disabled people with the means to work in a way that suits them, and to receive adequate compensation and welfare that satisfies their needs. Marx & Engels also state that, in place of an old society with its class conflicts, an association should arise in which the "free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx & Engels, 2004, p. 34), which can be interpreted to mean that individual and collective freedoms are inseparable, meaning that a just society should ensure the conditions for every individual's full development in order to achieve social progress. As well as this, it could be argued that the DPRK's guiding Juche ideology is comprised of elements that can be viewed as both advocating for, as well as stifling, the development of

disability rights. According to Kim Il Sung, in establishing Juche, people must take on an “independent and creative stand” in order to fix “all the problems arising from the revolution and construction” (Kim, 1986, p. 23). Disability rights is an issue that arises from revolution and state-building, and it could therefore be argued that Juche allows for empowerment of those with disabilities to become as independent as possible. The “creativity” element of Juche could also be interpreted as advocating for those with disabilities to have free reign in the establishing of their own self-advocacy movements and the advancement of their rights in society as they see fit.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Juche is a negative influence in disability rights as it promotes the idea that the leader is the decision-making “brain”, the party is the “nervous system” and the people are the “bone and muscle” that carry out the orders from above (Lee, 2003, p. 111). The fact that DPRK society is supposed to function in this way is inherently oppressive to those with disabilities, as physical disabilities that affect the people’s literal bones and muscles leave them in many ways unable to carry out the party and leader’s instructions, such in the implementation of economic plans central to the party’s vision for the country. On the contrary, it could be argued that if the party provided disabled people with adequate opportunities to work in a way that suits them, they could serve as “bones and muscles” in their own creative way. Communist and Juche thought could be used to make the disability rights movement more palatable to the DPRK government.

In order for the DPRK to promote disabled people occupying leadership positions, disabled people require equal opportunity in education. Inclusive education is a significant part of the CRPD. Article 24 stipulates that state parties should take steps to ensure an inclusive educational system at all levels that allows for development of personal potential, dignity and self-worth, as well as respect for human rights, freedom and diversity. Point 2(A) of this article states that people with disabilities should not face exclusion from the main educational system on the grounds of their disability (CRPD, 2006). This is something the state may fail to do for many people in its placing of disabled people in an extensive network of segregated special schools and special classes within regular schools (Education Profiles, 2022). It is very important that these facilities do not see overuse.

In a dictatorial regime such as the DPRK, it is also important to take into consideration that the concept of ablenationalism cannot be separated from the Kim family, who have served as the revolution's figureheads for over 70 years. All of the Kim family have been generally able-bodied, aside from speculation around Kim Jong Un's supposed ill-health and public appearances where has been seen limping and using a cane (Reuters, 2014), as well as issues around Kim Jong Il's health including heart problems and his suffering of a stroke in 2008 (Dekleva, 2020). According to his physician, Kim Il Sung also suffered from a number of health problems such as diabetes and heart problems (Hancocks, 2014), as well as a large benign tumour on his neck that he made significant efforts to conceal (Lee, 2021). It is possible that a North Korean leader developing a disability would dramatically change perceptions of disability in society.

The presence of positive role models can reduce feelings of inadequacy and isolation harboured by those with disabilities. Article 30.4 of the CRPD stresses that individuals should be entitled to equal recognition and support of their cultural identity, such as in the promotion of deaf culture (CRPD, 2006). It is arguable that, in the state's relative non-promotion of disabled role models apart from veterans, this article of the CRPD has not been properly implemented.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This research has revealed a long list of factors that make up the DPRK state's oppressive mechanisms against disabled people. The DPRK shows many of the hallmarks of other authoritarian states in its treatment of disabled people, such as poor access to healthcare comparable to the situation of modern-day Turkmenistan (Rechel & Mckee, 2005, p. 26) and the former Soviet Union (Rowland & Telyukov, 1991, p. 72, 75), as well as a widespread view of disability as a cause for shame and social ostracism. It appears that the DPRK's welfare framework, which is in many ways lacklustre, also plays a role. The DPRK is,

however, an exceptional case in that key information about the treatment of disabled people is shrouded in mystery due to the state's stifling of the flow of information.

Also discussed in the literature review was the example of Nazi Germany as the “ultimate oppressor” of disabled people (Mostert, 2002) (Gallagher, 2001). Although their extent is unverifiable, reports published by the United Nations have included evidence of acts in the DPRK that are similar to that of Nazi Germany and could fit the criteria of crimes against humanity, such as purposeful neglect of disabled prisoners (Pons et al., 2022, p. 63). Only further research and time will tell the extent to this. The DPRK's government is vilified across the globe, and the international community is in various ways preparing indictments for the state's leadership to be prosecuted and brought to justice for crimes against humanity. For example, there have been calls for Kim Jong Un's prosecution by the International Criminal Court (United Nations, 2014 p. 26). Arguments that the DPRK government is of a criminal nature and should therefore not be engaged with are understandable, but the author believes progress can only be made in various human rights fields, including disability rights, through creative cooperation with the current government. Within this, facilitating cultural exchange, humanitarian and development aid, as well as ascertaining a method to lift sanctions or modify them to reduce their detrimental impact on human rights issues are all vital for the realisation of disability rights in the country. The author believes that humanitarianism must come first instead of repetitive politics and sanctions that are being shown to be largely fruitless, such as in the DPRK's continuous nuclear development (Lim, 2023, pp. 38-39).

Especially with the DPRK's isolationism that has become in many ways more pronounced over the last few years (Human Rights Watch, 2024, p. 1, 4), it will take much work to rectify the shortcomings identified in this study. For example, due to cultural stigma around disability and a lack of free flow of information into the country, the author believes that it is unlikely that the *neurodiversity* movement, or something similar to it, will be established in a meaningful way in the DPRK over the next decade. Stigmatisation of people with neurological conditions can be a factor in development of mental illness (Jefferies, 2023), so it is imperative that neurodiversity is promoted in the DPRK and this area becomes subject to more research. Promotion of neurodiversity may start with the KFPD, and foreign aid organisations should partner with them to work with neurodiverse people in the country. Recent developments in this area such as the non-profit IGNIS Community providing lectures

and coaching on Autism to doctors at the Pyongyang Medical School Hospital are promising, and it is vital that momentum is kept in this kind of work (S. Yoon & J. Yoon, 2018).

Conclusion

It is apparent that the DPRK, as it stands, is an untenable environment for the development of its disabled population. The literature review reveals the many ways that authoritarian states have failed to protect their disabled populations throughout recent history, and the DPRK is largely no different. Humanitarian issues such as food insecurity and sanctions have a significant impact on disability rights, disabled people see inadequate representation in the legal and welfare systems, state media requires significant improvement in its representation of disabled people, and self-advocacy is severely hindered by lack of freedom of movement and assembly, which keeps disabled people in a choke hold in advocating for their rights. Conscription is likely to be greatly harming many people with neurodiverse conditions by placing undiagnosed people into a military environment that is unsuitable or unsafe for them, and the DPRK's prison system is likely an unbearable environment for many with physical and neurodiverse conditions. The army, the state's leadership and the placement of people with disabilities in rural areas have also been major pillars of ablenationalism in DPRK society. While not defending the regime, the author has also expressed his viewpoint that various elements of Communist and Juche thought could actually be used by the disabled community within the country to make the disability rights movement more palatable to the government.

Domestic organisations such as the KFPD play a very promising role in the development of the country's situation, but this research shows that progress in the field has been very slow. The post-COVID re-involvement of international aid organisations is of very high importance in rectifying many of the DPRK's disability rights issues in the humanitarian and cultural spheres, and organisations should aim to raise further awareness of neurodiversity in the country, as this will be a big factor in improving the wellbeing of a large group of disabled people who receive very little empowering discussion.

As the DPRK comes under further scrutiny with regards to its human rights climate, it is vital that disability rights continue to receive the attention they deserve. It is also possible for disability rights to become a major theme in international judicial action against the state's

leadership, making it even more important for a greater amount of research to take place in the field. Of paramount importance is further research into the situation of rights for people with psychiatric and neurological conditions and, hopefully, the government will become more transparent and the conditions for this research will arise in the next decade.

The road ahead is tough, but the post-COVID reopening of the DPRK and further research into the situation of North Koreans with psychiatric and neurodiverse conditions will hopefully allow for significant change to start to be enacted over the next decade.

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